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BEAUTY WITH A PURPOSE:  
ASSESSING HOW AUTHENTIC BRAND ACTIVISM  
AFFECTS CONSUMER MENTAL HEALTH.  
THE CASE STUDY OF RARE BEAUTY.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Be a cause, not just a business. Have a higher mission.” (Philip Kotler)<sup>1</sup>*

The relationship between businesses and consumers has changed significantly in recent years. These days, choosing a brand is more often determined by how well a company's identity aligns with the values and beliefs of the individual customers than by factors like product quality or price.

This change reflects a deeper evolution in consumers' behaviour, especially among younger generations like Generation Z, who see consumption as a representation of who they are rather than just an economic activity. For them, every purchase becomes a way to communicate their values and preferences, for social connection, and to express themselves. As a result, companies are increasingly expected to go beyond the conventional idea of carrying on their operations to make profits and need to take a stand on societal issues, somehow contributing to a cause. Customers search for brands that share their values, actively support important causes, and cultivate strong emotional bonds. Authentic *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) and *Brand Activism* play a crucial role in creating this connection, but to achieve them and not fall into woke-washing, being seen as using shady marketing techniques, companies need to undertake real efforts to contribute to society effectively. The beauty industry is a singular example within this evolving background, considering it has been under growing pressure to change for good since it has long been criticized for encouraging unrealistic standards of physical perfection. However, it still has a big potential for a positive social impact if it promotes inclusivity, body positivity, and mental well-being. That is because customers create emotional and psychological bonds with beauty products, often associated with identity, self-expression, and self-esteem, making this sector especially relevant in contributing to mental health discussions.

This dissertation aims to investigate the relevance of brand activism in addressing customers' mental health, with an emphasis on the beauty industry specifically. It

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<sup>1</sup> Kotler, P. *‘Biography of Philip Kotler’*. Philip Kotler. Available at: <https://www.pkotler.org/bio>.



explores how genuine brand activism can foster consumer loyalty and trust while at the same time helping destigmatize mental health conditions. Using the case study of Selena Gomez's cosmetics company, Rare Beauty, as an example, this study seeks to demonstrate that brand activism, when authentic and well-executed, can be both socially impactful and strategically effective.

The first chapter explores the different phases characterizing the customers' buying journey to understand how strong brand awareness and value-driven strategies can affect consumer behaviour. It then delves into the origins of corporate social responsibility and its evolution and progression into brand activism, highlighting their effects on the decision journey. An experiment is presented, emphasising the main results on brand awareness and brand affiliation, as well as the necessary conditions for genuine brand activism and corporate social responsibility. In addition, the possible backlash of inauthentic approaches, like woke washing, is explained to better understand the risk of damage to the company's credibility and consumers' trust.

The second chapter describes the development of beauty ideals and trends, highlighting people's shifting perceptions and better recognizing how brand activism became particularly relevant for makeup and the beauty industry at large.

It starts with the definition of the term 'beauty', outlining the historical evolution of beauty standards which arose from the need to ensure the survival of the species and to distinguish different cultures and traditions. It then presents how these beauty standards have evolved over time, the effects of globalization, and how the media were used to spread ideals and beauty norms.

A particular focus is placed on how these changes relate to mental health awareness and why the beauty industry is now expected to address this issue more than other industries. Part of the chapter is indeed dedicated to explaining how mental health became a priority in recent years, moving alongside beauty standards. In this industry, brands can make a difference if they sincerely embrace corporate social responsibility to communicate messages about body positivity and inclusivity, to abate the toxic standards created over the years, and reduce the negative impact this has had on people's mental health. The

chapter concludes by presenting the problematic situation we are facing in recent years and how, instead, makeup can positively affect mental health.

The final chapter of this dissertation presents the case study of Rare Beauty, serving as a standard for authentic brand activism. It describes the brand's values and mission, which were initially influenced by the founder's personal struggles. It also examines how Rare Beauty blends its devotion to mental health with its marketing messaging, merchandise, and programs, like the Rare Impact Fund. Additionally, it explores the brand's marketing mix (product, price, place, and promotion), demonstrating how each component is intentionally developed to preserve the brand's identity, encourage engagement with the community, and guarantee financial success without compromising its mission.

By combining theoretical understandings with a practical analysis, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that brand activism, when established on genuine values and supported by real action, can not only increase consumer engagement and brand loyalty but also function as an effective instrument for social good, especially in strengthening the mental health of consumers.

## **2. BRAND AWARENESS, CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BRAND ACTIVISM**

### **2.1 The Importance of Brand Awareness in Buyers' Decision Journey**

It is essential to start from the basis of brand management to understand the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility and brand activism. Building a brand is not only about creating a name, a symbol, or a product, but also anything that can make customers identify products and services as distinct from those of other sellers. The goal is to create differences among goods to help the customers' cognitive process by entering their "black box," in which they elaborate on internal and external stimuli and consequently make sense of the environment.

More specifically, branding affects *buyers' decision journey*, which is normally divided into five main steps:

1. *Problem recognition*: customers recognize the presence of an unsatisfied need that comes from the tension between internal stimuli, such as physiological needs, and external stimuli, as marketing actions or observation of the external world.
2. *Information search*: the second step is to identify all the options available by relying on different sources. Nowadays, most customers search for information on websites or social media because they trust public opinions and reviews more, rather than commercials and advertising.
3. *Evaluation of alternatives*: after all the information is available, some options are eliminated to find the best one. This is a critical moment in the decision process since customers evaluate their alternatives not only based on product-related features, which might lead to the satisfaction of their primary needs. What is also considered are the non-product-related attributes such as users' image, usage situations, and brand personality. The benefit that they seek is psychological, rather than functional and economic.

4. *Purchase*: the final choice has been made. Generally, by weighing the opinions on the attributes of the brand and the product with the importance that customers give to those attributes, and the final product is purchased.
5. *Post-purchase*: the journey does not end with the purchase, and brands must pay attention to the post-purchase behavior of their customers. If indeed buyers are satisfied with their decision, they might spread positive word of mouth with others and eventually become loyal customers. On the other hand, dissatisfaction is very threatening for brand image since the risk is not only to have negative reviews, but also to face huge backlashes.

Building a strong brand starts with *brand awareness*, which is necessary to differentiate from competitors, gain a position in customers' minds, and lead to the brand's choice. This means that satisfied buyers will be able to skip the second and third steps of the buying journey, as they already know their preference for the brand and trust it, and directly proceed with the purchase.

Brand awareness can be further divided into *brand recognition* (the ability to recognize prior exposure to the brand) and *brand recall* (the ability to retrieve the brand when some cues about it are given)<sup>2</sup>.

The goal is to help the cognitive processes of recognition and recall of the brand, and so to create brand awareness, which is the first step for building *brand loyalty*. These factors are essential in highly competitive markets to provide a strategic advantage and contribute to the long-term success of the organization.

*"A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is- it is what consumers tell each other it is."* (Scott Cook)<sup>3</sup>

This quote highlights the power of customers when it comes to building brand image. Brands need to adapt since nowadays customers dictate trends, and it has become necessary to create something that they value to connect with them. Loyalty is built

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, K. L. (1993). 'Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity'. The Journal of Marketing, 57 (1), 1-22.

<sup>3</sup> Savitz, E. (2012). 'Listening to social media cues doesn't mean ceding control'. Forbes, 4 August.

through strong emotions, so only by establishing a bond customers will start becoming aware of the brand, feeling connected and engaged with it, and eventually act as its channels of communication, spreading awareness even more.

In the digital era, it is crucial to gain the '*earned media*' such as *Word of Mouth* and *User Generated Content*: they are the most effective tools because with the overwhelming abundance of products, information, and influencers we have, traditional advertising to get people interested in the brand is not enough anymore. Customers' advertising for the brand matters a lot more: people do not perceive advertising and paid media as truthful, and this is also clear by considering the growing trend for companies to prefer micro-influencers, who are perceived as more authentic.

One effective way to reach these goals is to focus on something more than just selling products and gaining profits, but instead trying to communicate meaningful messages representing a purpose that aligns with both the values of the company and those of customers. A brand that stands for a cause can foster engagement, trust, and long-term loyalty. On top of that, in communicating these messages, brands could use storytelling and immersive experiences to have an impact on customers' minds through emotions.

## ***2.2 From Corporate Social Responsibility to Brand Activism***

*"Purpose is not the sole pursuit of profits but the animating force for achieving them. Profits are in no way inconsistent with purpose- in fact, profit and purpose are inextricably linked". (Larry Fink)<sup>4</sup>*

There are different ways to align with customers' preferences and values, to find the best strategy, brands must go beyond offering products and services for profits and find a 'purpose' that helps give it a personality and makes it easier to create a relationship with customers. This is very helpful to influence the perception of non-product related attributes and to rely on the secondary associations that buyers make with the brand. People indeed have realized that buying a product is not just about finding the most convenient offer, but every purchase is equivalent to self-expression: it communicates

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<sup>4</sup> Medac (2019). '*Larry Fink's 2019 Letter to CEOs*'. Medac.

their ideals. Buying then became a way to align with the purpose of the company to agree to certain values and differentiate the customer from other people. In the past years, activism both online and offline has become more present in our daily lives than ever before. Movements like Fridays For Future, #Me Too, and Black Lives Matter are just some examples of that<sup>5</sup>. Finding a narrative through a reasonable cause has become necessary as customers nowadays expect brands to take a stand on sociopolitical matters, by contributing to societal progress and considering all the challenges that the world faces constantly, and stakeholders are pushing them to address these concerns, especially if the government fails to do so.

This growing phenomenon of companies engaging in ethical business practices is defined broadly as *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)*. It emerged in the context of the stakeholder management approach and refers to “*company activities (...) demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and interactions with stakeholders*”<sup>6</sup>.

It can refer to economic, environmental, or social responsibility aspects: companies that implement CSR strategies not only strengthen their brand awareness and reputation but also foster brand loyalty through relationships based on emotional connections and shared values.

When customers perceive that a brand aligns with their beliefs, they are more likely to make purchases as they identify with it, viewing it as unique and distinguishable from competitors. This increases positive word of mouth, helps to accept premium pricing for the products and drives long-term loyalty and repeated purchases. Recently, another similar but distinct concept gained importance: *Brand Activism (BA)*. Defined firstly by Sakar and Kotler as “*the business efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society*”<sup>7</sup>, it is considered a more controversial extension of CSR, with different definitions in the literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Gerolin, G. 2021, '*Brand Activism in the Age of Woke Capitalism*' (Master's Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2020/2021).

<sup>6</sup> Herzberg, M., & Rudeloff, C. (2022). '*Should your brand take a stand? Comparing the impact of brand activism and CSR on brand equity*'. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 11(3), 248-262. P. 251

<sup>7</sup> Sarkar, C., & Kotler, P. (2018). '*Brand activism: From purpose to action*'. P.468

Comparing them, BA results as a natural evolution of CSR: both share the aim of improving society, and exploratory experiments reveal that they lead to similar positive effects on brand equity -such as perception of the brand, customers' perceived uniqueness, brand sympathy, brand identification and brand trust- which drives long-term market outcomes.

An exploratory online experiment to reveal the impact of BA and CSR on brand equity was conducted by Mathea Herzberg, marketing consultant at PUNCH, and Christian Rudeloff, professor of media and brand management at Macromedia University of Applied Sciences, in 2022. The goal was to test the impact of BA in comparison to CSR on different brand equity dimensions: perceived uniqueness of the brand, consumers' perceived brand sympathy, consumers' perceived brand identification, and consumers' perceived brand trust. Additionally, the effects on premium price acceptance, purchase intention and positive word of mouth were considered. A total of 215 respondents were divided into the control group, Group 2 for testing the effects of CSR, and Group 3 for BA. All the groups were asked to read a text that described a fictitious brand: the control group received a basic description of the brand with no further information, while Group 2 and Group 3 were provided with an additional paragraph regarding CSR and BA activities of the brand respectively. After the reading, all participants answered some questions on the brand equity dimensions already cited. Results confirmed that both CSR and BA have a positive impact on brand equity since Groups 2 and 3 showed significant differences with the control group in considering the brand as unique, having higher buying intention, brand sympathy, brand identification, and brand trust. They were more likely to spread positive word of mouth and accept premium prices as well. Still, no big difference emerged between CSR and BA<sup>8</sup>.

The only distinction that could be made between the two is that while CSR is typically more oriented towards internal and external stakeholders, and refers to more popular social causes, BA is usually more controversial involving potentially divisive, polarizing and contested matters, arising as a direct response to political issues through direct

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<sup>8</sup> Herzberg, M. e Rudeloff, C. (2022). 'Should your brand take a stand? Comparing the impact of brand activism and CSR on brand equity. *Journal of Brand Strategy*', 11(3), 248-262. P. 258

messages or practices and it targets more external stakeholder groups. That is why BA carries a high risk of image erosion and backlashes, as it can divide customers on the matters. For this reason, brands must carefully choose a purpose that authentically aligns with their identity and values, in order not to damage credibility and accountability.<sup>9</sup>

### ***2.3 The Phenomenon of ‘Woke Washing’***

Although there are growing expectations for companies to take a stand on controversial issues, and brand activism enhances brand equity, implementing it carries significant risks. The practice of engaging in inauthentic brand activism has emerged as a recent concern known as “*woke washing*”. The term has evolved as an extension beyond the concept of *greenwashing*, a term introduced by Jay Westerveld in 1986, when in an essay he criticized the hotel industry for falsely promoting the reuse of towels as an environmental strategy when the real motive was to save costs for companies<sup>10</sup>.

Brand activism is a necessary mix between spreading sociopolitical messages and engaging in corporate practice; each element of the strategy must be carefully balanced to make it perceived as truthful by customers. Still, this is not enough: if the brand’s messaging and practice fail to align with its purpose and values, it can be easily perceived as inauthentic and opportunistic, merely using it to sell more. This can lead to negative brand equity, reputational damage, and public backlash. To better understand when a company risks engaging in woke washing, it is useful to assess the alignment between its prosocial corporate actions and its activist marketing messaging.

Based on this, we can distinguish between four different categories of brand activism.

1. *Absence of brand activism*: These brands have not yet leveraged the opportunity for authentic brand activism, showing a low degree of both prosocial corporate practice and marketing messaging. As they are not engaging in the explicit communication of their purpose and values, customers’ expectations remain low.

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<sup>9</sup> Sobande, F. (2019). ‘*Woke-washing: ‘intersectional’ femvertising and branding ‘woke’ bravery*’. European Journal of Marketing 54 (11) , pp. 2723-2745. 10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134

<sup>10</sup> Orange, E., & Cohen, A. M. (2010). ‘*From eco-friendly to eco-intelligent*’. The Futurist, 44(5), 28–32.



This is often the case for B2B brands that do not directly interact with customers and do not rely on sociopolitical causes to shape their image. For these reasons, while they face minor risks of losing credibility, they might still explore new ways to include brand purpose, values, practices and messaging to exploit the opportunity for authentic brand activism.

2. *Silent brand activism*: In this scenario, there is the potential for authentic brand activism. On the one hand, brands have a strong purpose and values, and they can align them with prosocial corporate practice; on the other hand, they do not promote their mission through marketing messages. They somehow operate silently, focusing more on their long-term strategy regarding engagement in prosocial corporate practices rather than on immediate public recognition. Still, they should pair their efforts with an adequate messaging strategy to increase their connection with customers.
3. *Authentic brand activism*: This type of brand activism is superior to all other categories. Brand purpose and values are transparently communicated through marketing messages and high engagement in prosocial corporate practice, with all the elements perfectly aligned. Brands that belong to this category are perceived as fully authentic and reliable by customers. As a result, customers associate them with higher utility and added value for their product offerings. These positive associations have a big impact on brand equity, fostering customers' trust, and brand sympathy, and making them identify with the brand, viewing it as unique and reliable.
4. *Inauthentic brand activism (woke washing)*: This is where brands fall into the trap of woke washing. Here, they heavily engage in marketing messaging but fail to participate in prosocial corporate practices; in addition, they lack a purpose and values that make them genuinely committed to sociopolitical stances. Customers perceive them as opportunistic, expressing support for sociopolitical issues without addressing them concretely or failing to do so both externally and inside the organization. Brands' commitment requires adopting values and norms,

taking responsibility for its actions, and making internal changes. Failing to deliver what is promised leads to negative brand associations and the potential for huge backlashes. Moreover, woke washing can also occur when the brand activist message somehow challenges customers' existing perception of the brand, or it is perceived as threatening to their beliefs and social norms. As previously mentioned, brands must carefully consider how customers perceive the stimuli and how they respond by trying to enter their 'black box', ensuring they resonate with the audience to avoid unintended negative reactions<sup>11</sup>.

In the end, one thing brands must understand is that real brand activism is not just about speaking; instead, it requires real actions, continuous effort, and understanding of what the customers expect. They can avoid the trap of woke washing and foster trust only if they align their purpose, values, and corporate conduct.

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<sup>11</sup> Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A. e Kemper, J.A. (2020). 'Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), pp. 444-460.

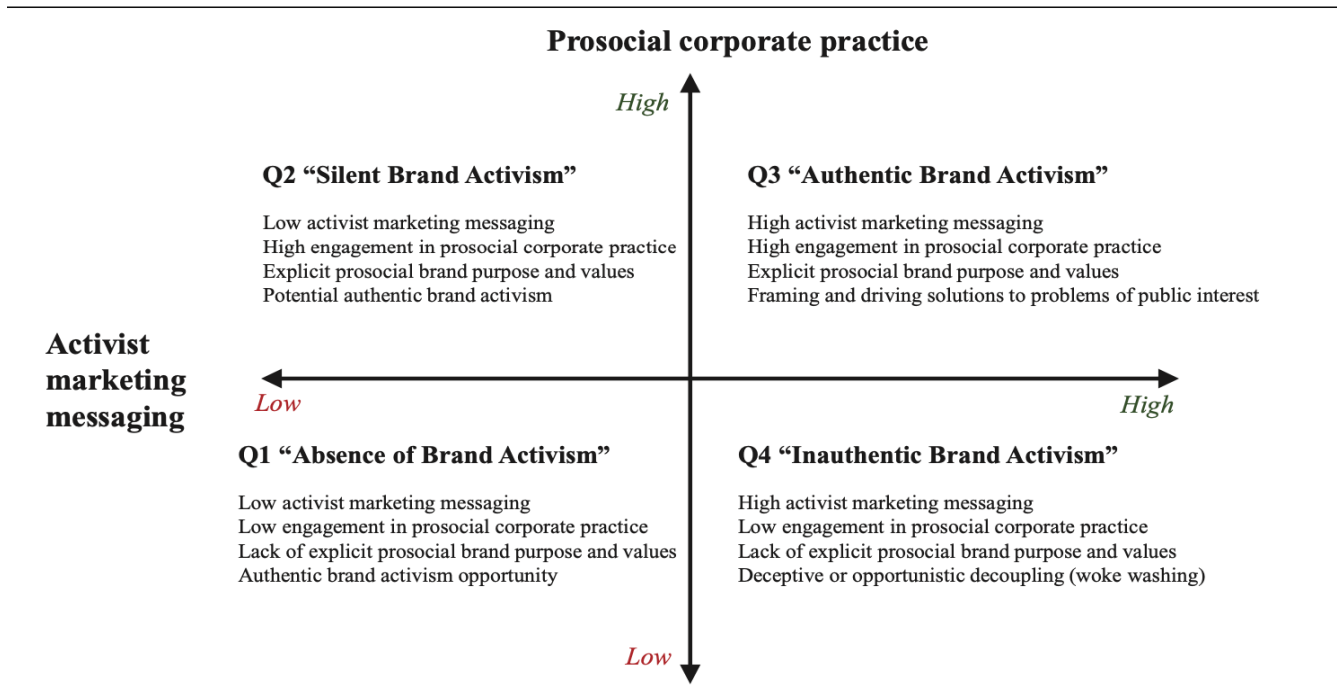


Figure 1: *Types of Brand Activism.*

Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A. e Kemper, J.A. (2020). 'Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?' *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), pp. 444-460.

Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0743915620947359>

### 3. BEAUTY EVOLUTION AND CUSTOMERS' MENTAL HEALTH

#### 3.1.1 The Evolution of Beauty

Numerous definitions of the term “beauty” can be found in the literature, reflecting its complicated nature. According to the Britannica Dictionary, beauty is defined as “*the quality of being physically attractive*”<sup>12</sup>, while for the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it includes “*the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit*”<sup>13</sup>.

Beauty has always been an ever-present part of the human experience throughout history, with women in particular using cosmetics of any type to enhance their appearance. This can be attributed to the belief that “*it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that ensure the survival of the species*”<sup>14</sup>. Examining how perceptions have evolved, also offers a broader understanding of some aspects belonging to the societal evolution and cultural dynamics over time<sup>15</sup>.

Beauty standards have historically varied across societies and cultures, and differences distinguished them in their values and norms. For example, during the prehistoric era, representations of the sumptuous figure of the Venus of Willendorf were found as a symbol of beauty and prosperity<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, during the Middle Ages, abundant forms were rarely represented in iconography as associated with the devil<sup>17</sup>. Ancient Egyptians followed strict beauty canons, idealizing “perfect” women, presenting them in figures with slim waists and small hips, golden skin with black hair, and harmonized using makeup such as eyeliner. Conversely, in Japan, pale skin with rosy cheeks and small lips

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<sup>12</sup> The Britannica Dictionary. ‘Beauty’.

<sup>13</sup> Merriam-Webster’s Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2008;131.

<sup>14</sup> Etcoff, N. L. (2000). ‘*Survival of the prettiest : The science of beauty*’. New York: Anchor Books.

<sup>15</sup> Dimitre Dimitrov, George Kroumpouzos, ‘*Beauty perception: A historical and contemporary review*’, Clinics in Dermatology, Volume 41, Issue 1, 2023, P. 33-40

<sup>16</sup> Weber GW, Lukeneder A, Harzhauser M, et al. ‘*The microstructure and the origin of the Venus from Willendorf*’. Sci Rep. 2022;12: 2926.

<sup>17</sup> Murtas, G. (2023). ‘*The ever-changing standards of female beauty: from diktats to inclusion*’. LinkedIn. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ever-changing-standards-female-beauty-from-diktats-inclusion-murtas>

was considered desirable, while ancient Greeks have always valued symmetry in men more than in women, with unique features like the unibrow being appreciated<sup>18</sup>.

Shifts in standards of beauty and their definition started changing even more with globalization, which facilitated greater interactions between societies.



*Figure 2: The Ever-Changing Standards of Female Beauty*

Murtas, G. (2023). 'The ever-changing standards of female beauty: from diktats to inclusion'. LinkedIn.

Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ever-changing-standards-female-beauty-from-diktats-inclusion-murtas>

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<sup>18</sup> Dimitrov, D. and Kroumpouzou, G. (2023). 'Beauty perception: A historical and contemporary review'.

### **3.1.2 The Origins of Beauty: “Cleanliness Next to Godliness” (1880-1920)**

Different eras in the globalization of beauty can be identified in the literature: the first one emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1880 and 1920 an accidental discovery revolutionized the practices of personal hygiene. A British and an Irish immigrant unintentionally discovered a new way of making soaps and started selling them in the United States without having a brand: Proctor & Gamble (P&G) was coming to life. It was one of the first beauty companies to advertise: the son of the founder, Harley Proctor, promoted the ‘Ivory Soap’ in the *Century Magazine*<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, the counterpart was established by William Lever thanks to the introduction of the ‘Gold Dust Washing Powder’ which enabled the company to go public and dominate the industry, producing half of the soap used in Britain by 1914<sup>20</sup>. Although beauty was still a small business, these innovations laid the foundations for a global expansion. Primary advertisements started spreading in the 1900s, linking mainly the idea of beauty to cleanliness and having European and American models as representatives of idealized standards.

### **3.1.3 From Soaps to Makeup: The Era of Hollywood (1920-1990)**

The second stage of the beauty expansion coincided with the golden era of the “Hollywood Stars”, starting in 1920 when advancements in cosmetics pushed their growth.

The so-called ‘pancake makeup’ became famous for its use on stage and in movies. The real revolution was its composition since new matte and water-repellent formulas permitted to wear it under the hot lights used in films and to solve the light-reflection problem<sup>21</sup>. In this era, the perception detached from the concept of cleanliness and makeup started being considered useful to “*hide imperfections and enhance a woman’s*

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, G. (2011). ‘*Globalizing Beauty: A Cultural History of the Beauty Industry*’.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* (2012). ‘*Beauty imagined: A history of the global beauty industry*’. NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Cosmetics and Skin (2016). ‘*Cake Make-up*’.

*natural beauty and [...] began to take precedence in advertising over cleanliness as the signifier of beauty*<sup>22</sup>.”

The real expansion of the market started thanks to the emergence of *L’Oreal Group*<sup>23</sup>, which nowadays still represents one of the largest cosmetic and beauty companies. It began to produce hair dyes for Parisian hairstylists, enlarging the idea of using cosmetics and new products to be beautiful. Women entrepreneurs started entering the business and played a pivotal role. Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden established the *Rubinstein* brand, and in 1932, the Avon corporation registered its first trademark including not only perfumes, toilet waters, and powders, but also rouge compacts and lipsticks.

The role of media in spreading beauty and attractiveness norms should not be underestimated: at that time, such as in modern years, they represented a great vehicle for transmitting ideals. Radio advertising during the 1950s further emphasized the social importance of looking and smelling clean, becoming a part of the cultural psyche in America. The term “body odor” was invented by William Lever, and used in advertisements it became a main concept to promote soaps that could avoid the personal consequences that it could cause. During the 1940s and 1950s, with the advent of television, European governments imposed restrictions on advertising. On the contrary, the United States faced no limitations, using commercials as a promotional tool for the beauty industry. Hollywood celebrities started becoming global icons, representing unattainable ideals of prettiness. Beauty pageants like ‘*Miss America*’ were transformed into media events in many countries, setting and reinforcing beauty ideals<sup>24</sup>. For global beauty brands that could not have access to television advertisements instead, magazines represented the major vehicle for companies who needed to promote their products<sup>25</sup>.

Fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Good Housekeeping* are just some examples of fashion magazines that helped spread the prototype of American models<sup>26</sup>. These started communicating that it was somehow a responsibility of women to look beautiful.

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, G. (2011). ‘*Globalizing Beauty: A Cultural History of the Beauty Industry*’. P. 9

<sup>23</sup> Vaughan, D. ‘*L’Oréal*’. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024. Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>24</sup> *Supra*, Note 22.

<sup>25</sup> Feng, Yang & Frith, Katherine. (2008). ‘*The Growth of International Women’s Magazines in China and the Role of Transnational Advertising*’. Journal of Magazine and New Media Research. 10. 1-14.

<sup>26</sup> *Supra*, Note 24.

*“Even though they may bemoan the power of the beauty myth, most women still continually struggle to measure up to the increasingly mass-mediated, pervasive, version of what is beautiful, desirable and acceptable<sup>27</sup>”*

It is indeed thanks to the representation of beauty in fashion and advertisements that perceptions and beliefs of women have been shaped to the point that Western ideals of beauty, coming from Hollywood stars, have become the global standard. Still, the prototypes of women presented in the magazines were somehow an anomaly: super-skinny models with sizes much lower than the average, spreading unattainable beauty standards that could communicate a harmful message to women. Skin color and beauty have played a crucial role in this era of development due to societal associations with education, segregation and income levels. For this reason, a content analysis of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* between 1974 and 2003 indicated that advertisements mainly promoted fair skin and light eyes, predominantly Eurocentric features<sup>28</sup>. This era witnessed an increase in the production of whitening and lightening products and the spread of standards which were not accessible for everyone.

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<sup>27</sup> Isa, M., & Kramer, E.M. (2003). ‘*Adopting the Caucasian ‘look’: Reorganizing the minority face*’. In E.M. Kramer (Eds.), ‘*The emerging monoculture: Assimilation and the ‘model minority*’ (pp.41–74). Westport, CT: Praeger. P.42

<sup>28</sup> Dillard, S. (2006). ‘*Is black beautiful? A content analysis of beauty characteristics of African-American women in the advertisements of Cosmopolitan and Essence*’. McNair Scholars Journal (1).



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ADS SAUSAGE

Figure 3: *The Pan-Cake Make-Up*

Vintageads (2022). 'Pancake makeup by Max Factor Hollywood', 1946. Reddit.

Available at:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/x38k39/pancake\\_makeup\\_by\\_max\\_factor\\_hollywood\\_1946/?tl=it&rdt=53607](https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/x38k39/pancake_makeup_by_max_factor_hollywood_1946/?tl=it&rdt=53607)

### 3.1.4 The Run to 'Perfection': Modern Trends (1990-2025)

The final era we can consider began in 1990 and continues until today with recent trends. Makeup to enhance beauty became not enough: the expansion of advertising as the main vehicle to diffuse messages through television and reality shows has emphasized the promotion of makeovers, weight loss, and cosmetic surgery techniques as essential components for females' beauty. During the 1990s, canons remained focused on light skin tones, large breasts and flat tummies, since people wanted to look like celebrities. The main message delivered was that women must look young forever, correct imperfections, and improve their faces or bodies<sup>29</sup>. This belief entered society so deeply that nowadays, most stars, representing the model of beauty to follow, are presented without imperfections and wrinkles.

Reality television shows about cosmetic surgery started gaining popularity, accentuating this shift. "*The Swan*" and "*Extreme Makeover*" are just examples of '*body culture media*', a genre of popular culture that portrays cosmetic surgery as a morally acceptable solution to personal insecurities and problems<sup>30</sup>". Data from the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons (ASPRS), illustrates this trend. In 1990, 1,250,000 reconstructive procedures and 640,000 cosmetic procedures were performed, and breast augmentation operations increased by 25%<sup>31</sup>. This confirms the effectiveness of the promotion of the new standards and how perceptions moved from enhancing natural beauty with cosmetics to modifying body features to fit the standards. Media emphasized that "*looks are a woman's most fungible asset, exchangeable for social position, money, even love*<sup>32</sup>".

On the one hand, the beauty trends continued to expand for the following years: following data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, in 2009 12.5 million cosmetic

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, G. (2011). '*Globalizing Beauty: A Cultural History of the Beauty Industry*'.

<sup>30</sup> Marwick, A. (2010). '*There's a beautiful girl under all of this: Performing hegemonic femininity in reality television*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*', 27(3), 251–266.

<sup>31</sup> Barringer, F. (1992). '*Ideas & Trends: Plastic Surgery; A Profession in Need of a Facelift*'. The New York Times, 23 February.

<sup>32</sup> Etcoff, N. L. (2000). '*Survival of the prettiest : The science of beauty*'. New York : Anchor Books. P.66

procedures and 5.2 million reconstructive procedures were performed, between these, 91% of patients were women<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, concerns about the role of media in presenting unattainable beauty standards have gained prominence since the early 2000s. Inclusivity regarding diverse body types and skin tones has become prioritized both by consumers and brands. Nowadays not only do celebrities continue to play a fundamental role in the industry, but influencers also contribute to the publicity of products and beauty trends: '*influencer marketing*' has become a part of brands' marketing strategy, creating new communication strategies. Thanks to the relationship between influencers and their community, it is perceived as more truthful and reliable, enhancing communication effectiveness<sup>34</sup>.

However, research suggests that exposure to mass media depiction of thin-ideal bodies might be linked to body image disturbance in women, leading to psychological outcomes such as mental health problems, body dissatisfaction, and wrong eating behaviors<sup>35</sup>. A survey made for British teenagers discovered that 35% of them worry about body image almost every day and that they feel ashamed or upset about their bodies. Between them, 40% revealed that social media represented a key contributor to body image anxieties and that, at some point, 35% had stopped eating or restricted their diets to fit in<sup>36</sup>.

Even influencers are sometimes questioned by customers in their advertising, and this shows in the increasing number of people choosing micro-influencers over bigger ones since they are perceived more like consumers than celebrities.

The pressure deriving from the media has resulted in new trends shaping the beauty industry, seeing Generation Z consumers as the driving force. In response to these challenges, brands have begun addressing mental health concerns together with inclusivity initiatives. Younger, more aware generations expect and value inclusivity, other than sustainability and aesthetics; brands are requested to commit to a cause and to promote a type of beauty that detaches from stereotypes and enhances different body

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<sup>33</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2009). '*Plastic Surgery Statistics Report 2009*'.

<sup>34</sup> Leung, F.F., Gu, F.F. & Palmatier, R.W. '*Online influencer marketing*'. J. of the Acad. Mark. Sci. 50, 226–251 (2022).

<sup>35</sup> Grabe S, Ward LM, Hyde JS. '*The role of the media in body image concerns among women: a meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies*'. Psychol Bull. 2008 May;134(3):460-76

<sup>36</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2019). '*Millions of teenagers worry about body image and identify social media as a key cause, new survey on mental health reveals*'.

types and skin tones. Makeup and body products are expected to be inclusive in colors, to cater to every skin tone while including all genders, not only women. The purpose is to stop the diffusion of outdated, toxic, and unreachable beauty ideals, and to build communities that encourage different and unique types of beauty that can make everyone feel comfortable in their skin. On top of that, discussions changed the perception of cosmetics from being a mere tool for adornment or to hide imperfections, to instruments for enhancing self-esteem and mental well-being.

### **3.2.1      *The Rising Importance of Mental Health***

For many years, mental health has been a marginal topic due to misinformation, stigma, and discrimination concerning mental illness. However, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of overall well-being, considering mental health a critical component equivalent to physical health<sup>37</sup>.

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is defined as “*a state of mental well-being that enables people to come with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is integral to our well-being*”<sup>38</sup>. This definition emphasizes the deep impact that mental health has on people’s daily lives. Having good mental health does not mean feeling happy or good all the time, but it facilitates handling negative emotions and feelings, making life easier. When instead, people deal with compromised mental health, it amplifies negative feelings such as stress, anxiety and worries, and diminishes energy levels, making life feel more of a struggle. We can imagine it like weather patterns: mental health can make people go through positive and negative periods, just as the weather oscillates with the seasons<sup>39</sup>.

There is no unique reason for changes in mental health, and it is not always easy to understand what can influence its patterns. The complex combination of the situations we

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<sup>37</sup> T. Patil, 'Growing Importance of Mental Health: A Look at Trends', LinkedIn, (2023). Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/growing-importance-mental-health-look-trends-trupti-patil-fuanf#:~:text=The%20growing%20importance%20of%20mental%20health%20is%20a%20positive%20trend,to%20live%20a%20fulfilling%20life>.

<sup>38</sup> World Health Organization, 'Mental Health', 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Mental Health Foundation, 'About Mental Health'.

face, the community we live in, social, biological, and structural factors can all combine to strengthen or undermine mental health, and sometimes, things that go beyond our control can have an influence<sup>40</sup>. Risks can manifest at different stages of life, but those occurring in sensitive periods such as early childhood and adolescence are extremely concerning and detrimental<sup>41</sup>. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO), reveal that globally 14% of 10-19-year-olds experience mental health conditions that often go unrecognized and consequently remain untreated. This affects adolescents, who are more exposed to negative social behaviors like exclusion, discrimination, and educational or other difficulties. Among the leading causes, depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders characterize a significant proportion of these conditions, sometimes paired with eating disorders and risk-taking behaviors<sup>42</sup>. Data are concerning and reveal why the gravity of addressing these issues is not to be underestimated, given that suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents. Furthermore, if not confronted correctly, these conditions can persist into adulthood, damaging both physical and mental health and restricting occasions to lead fulfilling lives<sup>43</sup>.

### 3.2.2 *Addressing the Stigma*

Despite the relevance of the matter in many aspects of life, the topic has traditionally been stigmatized, contributing to discrimination against people with mental illnesses. Nonetheless, studies on the causes and reduction of the stigma have increased rapidly in recent decades since they have been found to produce even more damages than the conditions themselves. These certainly contributed to the spread of stereotypes, (defined as “*negative beliefs about a group*”), prejudice, (“*agreement with stereotyped beliefs, or negative emotional reactions such as fear or anger, or both*”), and discrimination (“

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<sup>40</sup> World Health Organization, 'Mental Health', 2024.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 'Mental health: strengthening our response'. June 17, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 'Mental Health of Adolescents', October 10, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

*behavioral consequence of prejudice, such as exclusion from social and economic opportunities<sup>44</sup>”).*

These add additional challenges and different behavioral consequences to the already existing difficulties related to the symptoms of mental illness. For example, they represent a limit to opportunities for employment, reduce access to housing or medical care, and create disadvantages through discrimination. Moreover, the underestimation of mental health disorders, if perceived as less important than physical illness, can lead to minor investments of healthcare resources and unequal treatment of the conditions, harming patients even more<sup>45</sup>. Consequently, stigma represents a violation of fundamental human rights such as the right to health, representing a high barrier for people who might suffer in silence, postponing or stopping to seek treatment because of fear, shame, and discrimination<sup>46</sup>. Creating awareness and consciousness regarding the importance of the theme represents the only way to abolish shame and misconceptions, create a time and space to start an open conversation, and educate people on the topic. With the rise of social media and information available, new generations are more and more aware, allowing them to shape new trends and developments towards a new mental health landscape characterized by a more inclusive and supportive future.

### **3.2.3      *New Developments, Initiatives, and Awareness Campaigns***

Conversations around mental health are becoming less seen as an embarrassment but rather as an opportunity to discuss the topic and further spread awareness of the importance of self-care. This is a way to break down stereotypes and prejudices and to destigmatize, encouraging individuals who need it to seek help<sup>47</sup>. To better understand mental health conditions and increase access to healthcare, May has been established by

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<sup>44</sup> Thornicroft G, Mehta N, Clement S, Evans-Lacko S, Doherty M, Rose D, Koschorke M, Shidhaye R, O'Reilly C, Henderson C. 'Evidence for effective interventions to reduce mental-health-related stigma and discrimination'. *Lancet*. 2016 Mar 12;387(10023):1123-1132.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Randall J, Thornicroft G, Burti L, Katschnig H, Lewis O, Russo J, Shaw T, Wahlbeck K, Rose D. 'Development of the ITHACA Toolkit for monitoring human rights and general health care in psychiatric and social care institutions'. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci*. 2013 Sep;22(3):241-54.

<sup>47</sup> T. Patil, 'Growing Importance of Mental Health: A Look at Trends', LinkedIn, (2023).

the Mental Health America organization as the *Mental Health Awareness Month* since 1949; it “*provides education about the reality of living with a mental health condition- while it can make life more difficult, it doesn’t have to stop someone from having a fulfilling life*”<sup>48</sup>.

It was indeed created to educate on research and treatments, as well as to reduce the stigma and celebrate recovery. Not only does this event encourage those who are suffering to seek help, but it also has an outreach function, giving others the information to deal with and understand the impact of the conditions on daily life and be more supportive. In addition, Mental Health Awareness Month represents an opportunity for fundraising since healthcare is very expensive<sup>49</sup>.

Meanwhile, the increasing number of public personal narratives through media has helped to move the discussion in a positive direction, encouraging and normalizing the debate. Celebrities and famous people have started debating openly about their mental health conditions, attracting media attention, and further promoting empathy and reducing stigmas. Public figures such as Michelle Obama, who in 2020 shared transparently her experience with low-grade depression, have represented an example for everyone<sup>50</sup>.

Additionally, technology plays a pivotal role in mental health care, not only facilitating the spreading of information and experiences through media but also developing new instruments that can help individuals with assistance: not everyone can have access to direct support from experts because mental health care is still very high-priced. To face the problem, new apps, online platforms, and chatbots are emerging, offering alternatives to face-to-face appointments for people who want to be better off. Thanks to the pandemic crisis, these tools have been perfected and nowadays represent an effective substitute for in-person meetings, also eliminating geographical barriers to care. Moreover, governments and healthcare institutions are investing in mental health resources, enhancing overall accessibility for everyone.

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<sup>48</sup> Brown University Health Blog Team, *'The Importance of Mental Health Awareness Month'*, Brown University Health,

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> GiShawn Mance, *'The Growth of Mental Health Awareness'*, Howard University Magazine

It must be considered that contemporary mental well-being practices have emphasized a more holistic approach. That means detaching from traditional diagnoses and treatments to consider broadly physical, social, and emotional factors. Mental health care is now combined with a healthy lifestyle in general, which comprehends mindfulness practices and physical activity. Moreover, more focus is being placed on the importance of both mental well-being in the workplace and customers' mental health. On the one hand, brands are more and more aware of how stress negatively affects the productivity of employees and try to promote initiatives like workshops, mindfulness programs, and broader access to mental health resources<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, as brands are taking a stand on sociopolitical issues, they understand how important it is to spread the right message and to make it authentic. Increasing numbers of companies are taking part to Mental Health Month, launching products designed to create awareness or raise money for organizations that specialize in treating mental illness.

As Peggy Elsrode stated, *"The more we can talk and make [mental health conversations] more of a norm, people will feel comfortable to get the help they need"*<sup>52</sup>.

Of course, such initiatives must align with company values and must represent a genuine commitment to customers' mental health. Otherwise, they would be perceived as an excuse to catch attention or make money. People are increasingly interested in engaging in conversation with corporations on mental health issues and see that as an opportunity to become aware, but companies must use the right tone to avoid social media backlashes and upset consumers<sup>53</sup>. For instance, on May 20, 2021, which is Mental Health Action Day, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)<sup>54</sup> partnered with some beauty brands to develop the campaign *Beauty Cares*, intended to raise awareness around mental illnesses. *"We look for brands that share our values of hope, inclusion, empowerment, compassion and fairness"*<sup>55</sup> said NAMI's interim chief development officer. This

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<sup>51</sup> T. Patil, 'Growing Importance of Mental Health: A Look at Trends', LinkedIn, (2023).

<sup>52</sup> Fairchild Media Group, 'Peggy Elsrode', Women in Power (2022).

<sup>53</sup> Collins, A., 2019. 'How Brands Are Shining a Spotlight on Mental Health', WWD: Women's Wear Daily, 15 May, pp. 1–3.

<sup>54</sup> NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). 'We're Here to Help'. Available at: <https://www.nami.org/>

<sup>55</sup> Manso, J. (2021) 'Beauty brands partner with NAMI for mental health coalition', WWD: Women's Wear Daily, 20 May.



permitted NAMI to sign several brands as “Stigma-Free” partners, underlying their true commitment to the cause, based on strong policies around mental health.

### **3.2.4      *The Beauty Industry and Mental Health***

Mental health trends are profoundly influencing several sectors differently, but it is particularly important to highlight the significant change the beauty industry is experiencing. For many years, societal expectations of beauty have negatively affected mental health, telling people how they “should look”.

Beauty standards can be defined as “*the ideals and perceptions of beauty that society and culture place on people. They determine what is considered ‘beautiful’ and can include height and weight, facial proportions, and body shape.*”<sup>56</sup>”.

The meaning is that standards put a lot of pressure on individuals to look in a certain way, and they create unrealistic demands, being not only based on highlighting or concealing some personal characteristics, but they also rely on features that cannot be changed in any way.

Social media contributes to making the problem worse by spreading unrealistic standards, leading people to compare themselves to unachievable ideal thin bodies, often relying on images that have been altered and posted online. The continuous exhibition of these standards has been demonstrated to directly contribute to various mental health issues, including eating disorders, depression, anxiety, self-esteem issues, and social isolation. Research notes that females are more exposed to risks since they are presented with messages about how they should appear from the moment they are born<sup>57</sup>. Following the *Dove Self-Esteem Project* survey conducted globally in 2017, seven out of ten girls experience low body esteem, and both those with low body esteem and those with high body esteem feel appearance and beauty pressure<sup>58</sup>. Body dissatisfaction can

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<sup>56</sup> French, M. Medical News Today , May 2024. ‘*Beauty standards and Mental Health*’

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Dove (2017). ‘*The 2017 Dove Global Girls Beauty and Confidence Report*’.

consequently lead to psychological distress and poorer quality of life, apart from the risk of developing unhealthy habits and eating disorders.

But current trends have indicated a change of course. A first step in this direction is the rise of the movement on Body Positivity that considers beauty in all its forms and permits a more inclusive representation to make people feel good about their image. This does not mean that it is not permitted to work on insecurities or change something to improve, but that this change must originate only from personal will, not from external pressures<sup>59</sup>. The same reasoning applies to the use of makeup, which can have varying effects on self-esteem depending on the underlying motivations. If the decision to use it is influenced by external motivations like external regulation, identification, and integration, it might be detrimental to self-esteem, making one feel the need to constantly wear it to fit in the standards. On the other hand, when its use comes from intrinsic motivations, it acquires a completely different meaning, making cosmetic use valuable and enjoyable. Makeup can be applied to boost self-esteem, encourage creativity and personal expression, reflect the mood, or even serve as a mood regulator<sup>60</sup>. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that its frequent use can help women with depression. Symptoms of the condition are characterized by depressed mood or low pleasure or interest in activities for long periods, negatively affecting different aspects of life, including the perception of self-worth. Makeup can help in this sense, not only thanks to the positive effects on self-esteem and self-image but also because it involves different human senses, inducing pleasure and psychological feelings. An open, randomized, and controlled trial was conducted in 2024 to test this hypothesis. Results showed a positive relationship between the frequent use of cosmetics and a reduction in depressive symptoms, improvements in self-perception, and stress reduction. Thus, companies in general, particularly those in the beauty industry, can contribute to the cause through simple actions: they can promote positive self-perception and encourage self-expression, improving the well-being and mental health of the population<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Cosmopolitan Italia, March 21, 2023. '*Body Positivity: perchè cambiare non è segno di debolezza*'.

<sup>60</sup> Rosales, Robert & Copes, Lynn. (2020). '*Paint a Better Mood? Effects of Makeup Use on YouTube Beauty Influencers' Self-Esteem*'. SAGE Open. 10. 10.1177/2158244020933591.

<sup>61</sup> Veçoso MC, Zalla S, Andreo-Filho N, Lopes PS, Bagatin E, Fonseca FLA, Benson HAE, Leite-Silva VR. '*Effect of Makeup Use on Depressive Symptoms: An Open, Randomized and Controlled Trial*'. Dermatol Ther (Heidelb). 2024 Mar;14(3):777-791. doi: 10.1007/s13555-024-01128-w. Epub 2024 Mar 21.

#### **4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: RARE BEAUTY**

##### ***4.1 The History of Selena Gomez and The Foundation of Rare Beauty***

The history of Rare Beauty began between 2017 and 2018, inspired by the vision of Selena Gomez, an internationally renowned artist who has built a career encompassing music, acting, and business<sup>62</sup>. Gomez started her journey at a young age as a child actress in children's television series and later became a teen idol with the Disney Channel sitcom '*Wizards of Waverly Place*'. Over the years, she expanded her career into music by signing contracts, releasing albums, and earning multiplatinum records and Grammy nominations while establishing her status as an actress with Emmy-nominated roles<sup>63</sup>.

However, behind her public success lay serious personal setbacks that influenced her perspective on life and, in the end, served as an inspiration for Rare Beauty's mission. In 2014, Gomez disclosed that she had been fighting with lupus for more than two years, and as the illness worsened, she had to undergo a kidney transplant in 2017, which left her body with noticeable scars<sup>64</sup>. She also started having mental health issues around this time, which were eventually identified as bipolar disorder.

In her 2022 documentary *My Mind & Me*, she detailed these experiences and the emotional burden of managing her health while handling the pressure of fame. This indeed led her to cancel part of her tours to seek professional help<sup>65</sup>. Initially, she was hesitant to share her struggles publicly due to fear of judgment and social expectations, and she shared how she felt the responsibility of being a role model for young fans:

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<sup>62</sup> Manso, J. (2024), '*How Selena Gomez's Rare Beauty Built a Community Through Purpose*', WWD: Women's Wear Daily, 19 September.

<sup>63</sup> Biography.com Editors 2024, '*Selena Gomez*', Biography.com. Available at: <https://www.biography.com/musicians/selena-gomez>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>65</sup> Valby, K. October 3, 2023 '*Inside Selena Gomez's beauty juggernaut: The Rare Beauty founder on makeup, Gen Z, and navigating social media*'. Fast Company.

*” I had a responsibility at a very young age—young people were looking up to me. I didn’t know who I was. Having that responsibility would make me walk on eggshells a lot. I thought maybe it would be damaging to tell people who I am. It started to become a threat that freaked me out. Well, if you’re not right, then you can’t work”* she declared<sup>66</sup>.

Despite these concerns, she gradually started talking about her struggles to her fans through social media, but there was a price for this transparency. Her feelings of inadequacy were exacerbated by the frequent propagation of attainable beauty standards on social media. Indeed, her kidney transplant scars were photographed by paparazzi in 2018, and numerous negative comments regarding her body shape and scars appeared all over the media and magazines, reflecting how these perpetuated toxic ideals of physical perfection. Furthermore, she noticed how these images on social media negatively contributed to her mental health, making her desire to look like an ‘ideal body’ often shown in Instagram posts, and consequently making her constantly question her body image<sup>67</sup>. All the negative feelings led her to the decision to temporarily abandon social media after considering how these platforms promoted harmful standards of physical perfection. She communicated this decision with a moving message:

*“The beauty myth—an obsession with physical perfection that traps modern woman in an endless cycle of hopelessness, self-consciousness, and self-hatred as she tries to fulfil society’s impossible definition of flawless beauty. I chose to take care of myself because I want to, not to prove anything to anyone”*<sup>68</sup>

For Gomez, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 marked a turning point. She decided to use her position to promote inclusivity and mental health awareness because mental health problems were becoming more widespread worldwide. This dedication and her passion for makeup as a representative of self-expression and self-care, translated into the desire

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<sup>66</sup> Turnbridge 2023, ‘Selena Gomez & Mental Health: Her Struggles & Silver Linings’, Turnbridge.

<sup>67</sup> Valby, K. October 3, 2023 ‘Inside Selena Gomez’s beauty juggernaut: The Rare Beauty founder on makeup, Gen Z, and navigating social media’. Fast Company

<sup>68</sup> Selena Gomez, @selenagomez. 2018, March 20. ‘The beauty myth-an obsession with physical perfection that traps modern woman...’, Instagram [https://www.instagram.com/p/BgiEpRfAt5E/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed&ig\\_rid=7582da88-525d-47aa-b231-9947f0fbd780&ig\\_mid=E90BE7C5-FE85-41E6-B7B9-2E4B9A397809](https://www.instagram.com/p/BgiEpRfAt5E/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=7582da88-525d-47aa-b231-9947f0fbd780&ig_mid=E90BE7C5-FE85-41E6-B7B9-2E4B9A397809)

to launch the makeup company *Rare Beauty*, a cosmetics company designed not just to sell products but to build a welcoming community and encourage discussions about authenticity and mental health<sup>69</sup>.



Figure 4: *#WeAreRare Campaign*

Allure, 2020. Selena Gomez Rare Beauty. 'We Are Rare Community Call'.

Available at: <https://www.allure.com/story/selena-gomez-rare-beauty-we-are-rare-community-call>

#### **4.1.2 Rare Beauty's Unique Positioning**

Since the first announcement of the launch in early 2020, Rare Beauty was met with scepticism about another celebrity-backed brand adding to the already crowded market,

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<sup>69</sup> Manso, J. 2024, 'How Selena Gomez's Rare Beauty Built a Community Through Purpose', WWD: Women's Wear Daily, 19 September.

so the first important step was to build a company that integrated the brand's mission into its identity, delivering quality products but also listening to customers' opinions. Also, Gomez did not want to present as a makeup artist of Rare Beauty, but just like all the customers who simply wanted to include easy-to-use makeup as a part of their routine that they could enjoy for themselves.

To enter such a saturated market, Rare Beauty's marketing has been focused since the beginning on using a fresh approach through both the storytelling of Selena Gomez and her mental health journey and the stories of people who use the product<sup>70</sup>. Additionally, she wanted to embrace uniqueness and imperfections to challenge conventional standards of beauty, in contrast to many celebrity brands that only used their star power to attract customers. This was fundamental to have the attention of younger generations who are drawn more to brands that reflect their values, and to cultivate a strong community made of different people. Some of them became loyal to the brand because they are part of the fanbase or thanks to the engagement that Selena Gomez created with her followers through social media. But other times, customers are attracted to the whole world of Rare Beauty since it promotes an inclusive and empowering message to shift towards authenticity and self-acceptance, and highlights the importance of mental health against unrealistic beauty standards<sup>71</sup>.

For sure, Selena Gomez contributed with her influence to create social media buzz for Rare Beauty's products, but the customer base enlargement can be attributed to the mix of brand quality, mission, and engagement with them. Social media like Instagram and TikTok played a significant role in defining the success of the business, and with founder-led content, tutorials, and reviews, brand awareness and sales increased accordingly with the number of makeup enthusiasts and self-expression supporters.

With a vast product line that included 150 stock-keeping units (SKUs) and 14 categories, Rare Beauty debuted in 2020 on its official website and in Sephora stores throughout North America. In direct response to long-standing complaints of exclusion in the beauty

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<sup>70</sup> Rodriguez, E. C. 'How Rare Beauty Marketing is Transforming the Beauty Industry', Sky Society, November 8, 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, A. Aesthetics Today (2024) 'Selena Gomez Rare Beauty Make Up Brand Marks 4 Years'.

industry, foundations were offered in forty-eight shades to suit a range of skin tones<sup>72</sup>. It later entered the foreign markets by 2022 with its first online and in-store launch in the UK and Ireland, expanding subsequently to Sephora shops. Moreover, it further expanded its line by 2023 with new products for body care that promote self-comfort beyond the use of cosmetics<sup>73</sup>.

Nowadays, Rare Beauty continues to grow by selling beauty products and tools, accessories, and merchandise in more than thirty countries through its physical and online shops, solidifying its place in the industry and influencing competitors to have a more inclusive approach<sup>74</sup>. According to Bloomberg, in 2023, Rare Beauty's annual revenue accounted for more than \$350 million, with products so popular that some stores do not even expose them on the shelves. But the commitment of the founder and the company in general, remains clear: part of these revenues is dedicated to the *Rare Impact Fund*, aimed at making mental health services and education more accessible, and Selena Gomez co-founded the startup *Wondermind*, a platform that includes mental health-tools, interviews, and a newsletter<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> HAPPI (2020) '*Rare Beauty Launches First Line*'.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, S. The Industry.beauty (2024) '*Rare Beauty's rapid rise to success*'.

<sup>74</sup> Rare Beauty (2025) *International Store Locator*. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/international-store-locator>

<sup>75</sup> Bloomberg, 2024. '*Selena Gomez is a billionaire after Rare Beauty success*'.





*Figure 5: Rare Beauty's Inclusive Products*

Pedestrian TV (2023) 'Rare Beauty Australia: Selena Gomez's new makeup line launches Down Under', Pedestrian TV.

Available at: <https://www.pedestrian.tv/style/rare-beauty-australia-selena-gomez/>.



#### 4.1.3 *Authentic Brand Activism: The Rare Impact Fund*

In outlining the origins of the brand and its community, Katie Welch, the chief marketing officer of Rare Beauty, explained how they wanted to create something more than just a beauty brand. It all started with the goal of aligning the brand purpose with mental health, to have an impact on people's lives by creating a welcoming and inclusive community<sup>76</sup>. The objective is immediately clear from the mission, vision, and value proposition the brand proposes:

*"Rare Beauty is breaking down unrealistic standards of perfection.*

*This is makeup made to feel good in, without hiding what makes you unique—because Rare Beauty is not about being someone else but being who you are<sup>77</sup>".*

*("About Rare Beauty | Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez")*

*"We are on a mission to help everyone celebrate their individuality by redefining what beautiful means. We want to promote self-acceptance and give people the tools they need to feel less alone in the world.*

*Our vision is to create a safe, welcoming space in beauty—and beyond—that supports mental well-being across age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, cultural background, physical or mental ability, and perspective.*

*We believe in the beauty of imperfections.*

*We nurture a caring, respectful community.*

*We create meaningful connections and relationships.*

*We champion authenticity and positivity.*

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<sup>76</sup> Manso, J. 2024, 'How Selena Gomez's Rare Beauty Built a Community Through Purpose', *WWD: Women's Wear Daily*, 19 September.

<sup>77</sup> Rare Beauty, 'About Us'. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/about>

*We lead with transparency to build trust.*

*We believe there is power in being vulnerable<sup>78</sup>. ”*

*(“About Rare Beauty | Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez”)*

At its heart, Rare Beauty aimed to initiate an important conversation about mental health advocacy, self-love, and self-acceptance by intentionally creating an environment where these subjects are freely accepted and discussed. The company’s rise in the competitive beauty sector has been largely attributed to its ability to combine clever marketing techniques with an honest commitment to social change. In contrast to many well-known brands, Rare Beauty understood that Generation Z and Alpha consumers were becoming more interested in businesses that truly reflected their values. These groups are actively changing the way they buy, giving preference to companies and products that reflect their identities and their beliefs<sup>79</sup>.

In light of this, it is important to focus on the Rare Impact Fund as a pillar of the company’s genuine brand activism and corporate social responsibility. The fund, which was established in 2020 alongside the brand, embodies Selena Gomez’s goal to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues so that others will not experience the same loneliness and difficulties she did. It facilitates access to essential mental health resources and fosters general well-being by acting as an intermediary for broader community support. As part of this effort, it raises funds by channelling 1% of all Rare Beauty sales, supplemented by contributions from philanthropic foundations, individuals, corporate partners, and community-driven initiatives. Funds are allocated to support both organizations that provide mental health resources to young people, and organizations developing culturally relevant resources for under-resourced communities. It also collaborates with non-profit organizations and employs social media platforms to amplify awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

This multifaced approach represents a significant contribution, considering the huge gaps in mental health care around the world. As highlighted on Rare Beauty’s website,

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<sup>78</sup> Rare Beauty, ‘About Us’.

<sup>79</sup> Rover, C. Alistdaily.com. (2023). ‘How Rare Beauty and Fenty Leverage Gen Z Values to Drive Media Value’.

according to recent data, 62% of people struggling with their mental health are not receiving the complete care they need. Furthermore, only 2% of global government budgets are devoted to mental health, and financial needs are met in only 34% of responding countries. The Rare Impact Fund gathers these quantitative and qualitative data from its non-profit partners to maximize its impact and ensure accountability. It then uses these insights to monitor progress and continuously improve its development strategies<sup>80</sup>.

In 2023, Rare Beauty hosted its second annual Mental Health Summit, providing a forum for constructive discussions about mental health and self-acceptance. More than seven million people watched the live-streamed event on TikTok, which included opinions from Rare Impact College Ambassadors, mental health advocates, community members, and beauty creators.

By 2023, the Rare Impact Fund had raised and invested \$7 million toward its long-term goal of \$100 million, helping to collect 3000 mental health resources, which impacted more than one million young people. Additionally, on World Mental Health Day, the ‘*Make a Rare Impact*’ campaign with Sephora was launched, donating \$2 million to the Rare Impact Fund, representing 100% of Rare Beauty sales. In accordance with these initiatives, Rare Beauty places a high priority on educating its staff members about mental health issues, providing them with Mental Health First Aid certification, which enables them to assist those who are struggling with mental health challenges<sup>81</sup>.

Through its solid commitment to its brand purpose and values, continuous participation in prosocial business practices, and consistent marketing messaging, Rare Beauty represents a powerful example of authentic brand activism.

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<sup>80</sup> Rare Impact Fund (2025) ‘*About Us*’. Available at: <https://rareimpactfund.org/about/>

<sup>81</sup> Rare Beauty (2025) ‘*Social Impact Report 2023*’. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/social-impact-report-2023>



*Figure 6: Mental Health Summit*

Rare Beauty, 2023. 'Social Impact Report 2023'.

Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/social-impact-report-2023>

#### 4.2.1 *Origins of The Marketing Mix*

To understand how Rare Beauty and companies in general gain a competitive advantage, it is important to observe how they respond to the needs of the targeted customers and the competitive pressures through their strategic decision-making. A useful tool that can be used to carry out this kind of analysis is the marketing mix framework. The term “*marketing mix*” was first used in 1965 by marketing professor Neil H. Borden, who was inspired by Professor James Culliton’s definition of the marketing executive as a ‘*mixer of ingredients*’ who can combine marketing procedures by either following a pre-established “recipe” or create a new one to fit the available “ingredients”<sup>82</sup>. Borden argues that while there are infinite combinations of marketing methods and policies that can be adopted by a firm to position in the market and react to competition, the fundamental list of components is always the same. Businesses can choose the best marketing mix to use based on the resources at their disposal, market conditions, and the changing preferences of their target audience.

The original marketing mix involved a broader set of elements, including: *Product Planning, Pricing, Branding, Channels of Distribution, Personal Selling, Advertising, Promotions, Packaging, Display, Servicing, Physical Handling*, and finally, *Fact-Finding and Analysis*. All these elements can help firms define both their short-term strategy to deal with rapidly changing market conditions and their long-term plans to achieve broad objectives and goals<sup>83</sup>. McCarthy later improved Borden’s idea by combining the original elements into the well-known 4Ps, *Product, Price, Place*, and *Promotion*, four crucial factors that affect marketing managers’ choices aimed at satisfying the target market and facing competition<sup>84</sup>. These factors represent the controllable variables that the company can manipulate to affect the behaviour of its customers.

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<sup>82</sup> Culliton, J.W. (1948). ‘*The Management of Marketing Costs*’. Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, MA: Harvard University.

<sup>83</sup> Borden, N.H. (1984). ‘*The concept of the marketing mix*’.

<sup>84</sup> Richers, Raimar. (1961). ‘*Basic marketing, a managerial approach*’. Revista de Administração de Empresas. 1. 149-152. 10.1590/S0034-75901961000100013.

The first element, *Product*, refers to the good or service that is provided in return for money. It is a combination of physical, tangible qualities, such as colour, design, packaging, and performance, but also of nonphysical components like perceived value by customers and brand identity, which can encourage repeated purchases.

*Price*, the second component, shows the amount of money buyers must pay to acquire the product. Some of the factors that affect pricing decisions include costs of producing and promoting the product, market competition, market share, and perceived value for customers. Pricing should, therefore, be dynamic and frequently modified to meet the needs of the business. To obtain a competitive advantage and meet established outcomes, firms may also use specific pricing techniques. Some examples are *skimming* and *penetration* strategies<sup>85</sup>, which respectively consist of entering the market by charging relatively high or relatively low prices compared to similar products. Psychological pricing tactics, such as using price figures like '\$19.99' instead of '\$20.00', are also commonly used to make customers believe that certain prices are more appealing than others.

Once the main attributes of the product are determined, businesses need to choose the best distribution channels to deliver their products, which are generally referred to as *Place* and comprise both physical and virtual stores. Online shops make the purchase easier, especially for niche products that can reach wider groups of customers without significant entry barriers and setup costs. For physical selling, companies can decide to make products directly available to customers without an intermediary or a distributor to communicate directly with them. Alternatively, they might refer to intermediaries like retailers, who usually have a stronger relationship with customers for their extensive offering, or wholesalers characterized by lower prices. Profitability is greatly impacted by distribution choices, and adopting an omnichannel strategy to meet the needs of

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<sup>85</sup> AlJazzazen, S. A. (2019). '*New product pricing strategy: skimming vs. penetration*'. In Proceedings of FIKUSZ Symposium for Young Researchers (pp. 1-9). Óbuda University Keleti Károly Faculty of Economics.

different segments is becoming more and more popular. This integrates multiple channels to provide a seamless customer experience across platforms<sup>86</sup>.

The last element, *Promotion*, is possibly the most influential of the mix. It includes any promotional activity, like advertising and publicity, meant to communicate with and persuade target customers to buy the products, shaping and developing a brand reputation in the marketplace. In order to raise awareness, gather new customers, and convey information to the target, advertising in all its forms is indeed crucial. Testimonials and influencer marketing are also included in the promotion component since these bring change in the mindset of people who follow and trust their role models and celebrities. This factor is further strengthened by special offers, promotional trials, and time-limited offers, which generate urgency and let customers try the product before making a purchase<sup>87</sup>.

The 4Ps framework enables firms to design an effective marketing strategy aimed at gaining a competitive advantage by balancing customer satisfaction with the company's organizational goals and profit maximization. This is possible only when all the elements of the marketing mix are integrated and constantly managed, as a change in one component might affect all the others and, consequently, the entire business strategy.

#### **4.2.2      *Rare Beauty's Marketing Mix: The 4Ps***

All Rare Beauty's qualities are effectively communicated to customers through a well-defined and strategic marketing approach. Rare Beauty uses a carefully constructed marketing mix, composed of product, price, promotion, and place, to convey its values

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<sup>86</sup> Asmare, A., & Zewdie, S. (2022). 'Omnichannel retailing strategy: a systematic review'. The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research, 32(1), 59–79.

<sup>87</sup> Singh, M., 2012. 'Marketing Mix of 4P's for Competitive Advantage'. IOSR Journal of Business and Management, Vol. 3(6), pp.40-45.

and connect with the community. Each element is important in reinforcing brand identity and customer loyalty, contributing to its overall success.

- ***Product: Beauty for Everybody***

Embracing diversity and inclusivity is essential for the brand, and this is also communicated through its products, ensuring that its shade offering harmonizes with a multitude of skin tones. Rare Beauty's products want to guarantee quality while meeting the needs of different people to make everyone feel represented. Foundations range from light to deep tones, coming in forty-eight different shades to ensure that customers with different skin tones can use them. The same applies to blushes, bronzers, and contours, coming in a spectrum of shades that can be used by darker skin tones as well. Packaging is simple and elegant, communicating the idea of something delicate that is not intended to hide differences that make everyone unique, but rather to emphasize personal beauty and make people feel confident in their skin. The commitment to ethical values is also demonstrated through the production of cruelty-free and vegan products, as well as the use of sustainable and recyclable packaging<sup>88</sup>. Furthermore, the brand wanted to communicate with its products that makeup can be a tool for beauty and a form of self-care<sup>89</sup>. The choice of the names of the collections is indeed not unintentional and is planned to speak for the brand. Some examples of line names are "*Find Comfort*", "*Always an Optimist*", "*Kind Words*", "*With Gratitude*", and "*Stay Vulnerable*". That is a way to blend mental health advocacy into its products to encourage self-expression and self-love and to make customers perceive an emotional value alongside the physical one<sup>90</sup>.

- ***Pricing: Quality and Affordability***

The makeup product lineup can be defined as 'accessible luxury', placed between drugstores and premium brands, meeting the needs of different categories of people. Prices range between \$14 and \$29, and even if they cost more than drugstore makeup

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<sup>88</sup> HavStrategy (2023) '*Marketing Strategy Of Rare Beauty*'.

<sup>89</sup> Abad, A. (2024) '*How Rare Beauty's Marketing Mix Drives Inclusivity and Purpose*'.

<sup>90</sup> Rare Beauty, '*Shop All*'. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/collections/shop-all?page=6>



brands, they are still more accessible than their luxury counterparts and perfectly in line with celebrity competitors<sup>91</sup>. Rare Beauty still assures customers that they are paying for something valuable, not only for the donations to the Rare Impact Fund but also for the quality of the products they buy. The brand's products are famous for being very pigmented, to last for a long time, and emphasis should be placed on the meticulous research and testing made on each product by scientific experts, making them suitable also for sensitive skins. The brand describes how they are vegan and cruelty-free, paraben-free, silicone-free, and non-comedogenic, differentiating them from drugstore makeup. Additionally, some attention to detail guarantees a pleasing customer experience, making people recognize additional value for the brand, and somehow justifying a higher price. The Rare Beauty website is aesthetically pleasing and provides a seamless experience for users. In the easy-to-navigate product descriptions, customers can find details about the ingredients, benefits, and some tips for the application. Also, the presence of reviews and user-generated content helps customers understand how products perform<sup>92</sup>. The balance between affordability and quality has been fundamental in establishing the company's position with an appreciative consumer base that goes beyond Selena Gomez's fan base.

- ***Place: Seamless Journey***

The geographical area covered by Rare Beauty's shops expanded substantially from its initial debut in North America. Nowadays, horizons have broadened to sell in other areas such as Europe, the Middle East, and Asia Pacific, serving around thirty countries<sup>93</sup>. The brand was also able to create a seamless omnichannel strategy, ensuring customers a great experience both online and offline. Rare Beauty shops still do not exist, but in 2020, it launched its cosmetics in Sephora stores, making them physically available and using the retailer's distribution channels. Its presence in physical stores allows customers who prefer it to examine and test the products before buying them. All products are also sold on both Rare Beauty and Sephora's websites, and some online tools are offered to find

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<sup>91</sup> HavStrategy (2023) '*Marketing Strategy Of Rare Beauty*'.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Rare Beauty (2025) '*International Store Locator*'.

Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/international-store-locator>

the perfect shade that can match different skin tones<sup>94</sup>. Furthermore, it offers the option of in-store testing to favour digital customers and foster loyalty and satisfaction. The official website uses personalized product recommendations and special offers based on purchase history and preferences, making customers feel seen and understood, and encouraging them to try the products in the stores. Through the brand's official pages on Instagram and TikTok, accounting for respectively 8,2 and 4,5 million followers, it is possible to read descriptions and reviews of the products, associated with photos and videos of celebrities and other people from the team testing them and giving their opinions about them. This omnichannel approach is relevant not only in making sales but also in creating a community that shares the values of the brand. On the website, a section called '*Comfort Club*' proposes videos of experts' sessions about mental and physical well-being<sup>95</sup>. Live virtual events, such as community calls and live streams, have been hosted to talk about relevant topics on mental health or to make people take part in the Rare Beauty Mental Health Summit. Finally, social media are used to spread knowledge even more. Most of them advise on personal well-being and self-care, encouraging customers to test the products and share their experiences with or without the brand, fostering engagement, and user-generated content<sup>96</sup>.

- ***Promotion: More than Marketing***

Rare Beauty is known for its promotional approach, which focuses on purpose-driven storytelling and genuine commitment. The brand connects with its audience, starting from its founder, Selena Gomez, who constantly engages in brand promotion and content creation, using her public image to captivate audiences. The various social media platforms are used to publish makeup tutorials, information about new launches, and shots from everyday life to encourage followers to share their experiences and opinions openly. Posts are always paired with positive messages of self-love, inclusivity, and mental health advocacy, constantly highlighting the intentions of the company. To gain even more popularity, influencer-based advertising is used to catch the attention of a broader

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<sup>94</sup> Rare Beauty, '*Shade Finder*'. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/pages/shade-finder#/>

<sup>95</sup> Rare Beauty, '*Comfort Club*'. Available at: <https://www.rarebeauty.com/blogs/comfort-club>

<sup>96</sup> Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez, @rarebeauty. Instagram.  
Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/rarebeauty/>

audience, but still, authenticity in advertising content is prioritized. Famous beauty influencers on YouTube, such as Tati Westbrook<sup>97</sup> and Nyma Tang<sup>98</sup>, have helped promote Rare Beauty with some authentic review videos using its products. Also, TikTok creators partner with the brand to show tutorials and beauty hacks, increasing Rare Beauty's visibility among younger generations. Since paid advertisement is usually considered less credible, these reviews lack any sponsorship, making customers perceive them as more authentic and encouraging them to try the products. The brand differentiates in its social media advertising campaigns by featuring real people using the products in their everyday lives, discussing its formula, and emphasizing the importance of a wide shade range. This fosters community connection and loyalty and promotes inclusivity in a market that was for a long time criticized as being discriminatory. Finally, Rare Beauty creates a connection with the community while promoting its products and spreading its message, thanks to social media campaigns to differentiate from brands focusing on physical appearance. The campaign *#WeAreRare* was launched to make users share their stories on self-acceptance and personal growth, giving rise to user-generated content and reflecting perfectly the company's mission of spreading self-love and more realistic beauty standards. To emphasize the importance of mental health, instead, the '*Mental Health 101*' initiative was made to raise awareness on mental health issues and was used to raise money for mental health services<sup>99</sup>. Despite the presence of purposeful storytelling in every element of advertising, Rare Beauty still uses some strategies to boost sales. Users are provided with personalized advertising, product scarcity messaging, and limited-time offers, which create urgency in customers' minds and can significantly increase conversion rates.

What is clear from the brand's history, initiatives, and marketing mix is that while Rare Beauty's offerings differentiate in terms of quality, packaging, and reputation, what essentially drives the sales and popularity is sincerely believing in the purpose and mission it carries on. It is used not just as a marketing tactic but as an instrument to

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<sup>97</sup> Krause, A. (2020) 'Inside the life of YouTuber Tati Westbrook, who just announced that she's closed her beauty brand', Business Insider, 5 November.

<sup>98</sup> Peltola, I. (2024) 'Is Nyma Tang the new voice for black people in the makeup industry', CityLive Glasgow, 6 March.

<sup>99</sup> HavStrategy (2023) '*Marketing Strategy Of Rare Beauty*'.

embrace corporate social responsibility by having a concrete impact on the community, and to inspire others to take care of their physical and mental well-being, learn self-love, and promote inclusivity.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This dissertation was intended to explore the role that authentic brand activism plays in addressing and influencing consumer mental health, with a specific focus on the beauty industry. In recent years, brands have been required to take a stand on societal issues to find their purpose and follow a higher mission than just providing products and services, and to align with the causes that affect younger generations who are deeply values-driven. Through the case study of Rare Beauty, this research demonstrated that brand activism, when concretely included in a company's purpose through consistent marketing strategies and business practices, can create both commercial success and social good.

The findings of this analysis highlight the crucial role of authenticity in developing truthful brand activism. As consumers' expectations on mental health and inclusivity shift, brands that show genuine concerns for their well-being can foster strong emotional connections, brand loyalty, and long-term trust. Conversely, superficial engagement, commonly defined as 'woke-washing', carries the risk of public backlash and loss of brand credibility, highly damaging companies. For this reason, brand activism was presented as needed to be more than just a campaign, but as an ongoing commitment supported by concrete actions and continuous, transparent communication.

As discussed in the chapters, Rare Beauty provides an example of what authentic brand activism looks like in practice. By integrating Selena Gomez's mental health journey with the brand's mission and values, it has established a powerful connection with its customer base. Its efforts go beyond awareness to concrete operations, from product naming and inclusive designs to the establishment of the Rare Impact Fund, which serves to invest in mental health initiatives and promote inclusive beauty standards. This is particularly relevant for the beauty sector, historically been criticized for promoting unattainable and toxic ideals that could harm consumers' well-being. On the contrary, Rare Beauty has been able to inspire conversations on self-acceptance, diversity, and psychological well-being.

Ultimately, this study suggests that combining ethical marketing, brand purpose, and social activism is not only feasible but increasingly necessary. The growing recognition of the importance of overall well-being, considering mental and physical health equally important, has raised the need to abate the stigma associated with the topic. The beauty industry has a close relationship with self-perception and identity, holding a huge potential to drive positive cultural change for the years to come. If executed with honesty and continuous effort, brand activism can be a strategic tool for companies, contributing to both consumer validation and broader mental health awareness.

As the conversation around mental health continues to evolve and new generations redefine the standards of expectations from brands, companies that embrace and support vulnerability, inclusivity, and authenticity will be the ones that will succeed. The future of beauty lies not in selling perfection, but in supporting people and helping them feel seen, heard, and valued.

*“Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage”. (Brené Brown)<sup>100</sup>*

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<sup>100</sup> Brown, B. (2016) ‘*Brené Brown on the physics of vulnerability*’, Dumbo Feather, 2 February.



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